

TORNADO



Suggested retail price \$2.00



The London Free Press

TORNADO

By Randy Ray
of The Free Press

The dinner hour, Aug. 7, 1979.

For thousands of residents in the tri-county region of Oxford, Brant and Haldimand-Norfolk, it was one meal time that will be long remembered.

As hundreds of residents in the city of Woodstock and dozens of surrounding communities and farms tidied the dinner dishes, relaxed with dessert or settled comfortably into their evening newspapers, two vicious tornadoes ripped through the area.

Within 60 minutes — between 6:30 and 7:30 p.m. — the pair of ravaging twisters had left a trail of destruction unmatched in the area's history. Two persons were killed, thousands left without shelter. An estimated \$100 million worth of property, excluding crops, was damaged.

What had started as a routine, quiet Tuesday evening was in minutes one of the worst storm disasters in Ontario history. The next day the Ontario cabinet declared the region a disaster area.

Weather officials in London and Toronto said the tornadoes were born in the humid air and solemn grey-black skies somewhere southeast of Stratford. The first cut a 33-mile long quarter-mile wide swath from Woodstock to areas south of Jarvis and the second sliced a 20-mile long west-east path through Bright and Hickson.

Within minutes, wire service machines across the region began tapping out the disastrous result.

In southwest Woodstock more than 350 homes damaged or destroyed. St. Patrick's, Christian Reform and Southside schools severely battered, Christian Reform Church gone, Hobart Brothers of Canada Ltd, the Provimi flour mill and newly constructed King Hydraulic Ltd. plant crushed, at least two churches damaged and hundreds of feet of power lines strewn across debris-littered city streets.

Oxford Centre, a tiny Oxford County hamlet of 250, virtually knocked off the map. Thirty homes, the community's only general store, two churches and the 100-year-old community centre reduced to rubble.

New Durham, a small village to the southeast on the Oxford-Brant County line, flattened. Farther south, Vanessa, a small Haldimand-Norfolk village, also flattened. Half the centre's 55 homes lost. About 75 people homeless. The century-old Methodist Church and gravestones in the village's cemetery toppled. One Vanessa tobacco farmer lost his \$150,000 home, the bulk of his 260-acre crop and more than \$500,000 in kilns and equipment.

Countless farms — many more than 100 years old — also fell to the tornado's ferocity.

North of Woodstock the second tornado cut an equally devastating path through the rich

farmland in the Hickson and Bright areas.

An OPP spokesman said a 10-square-mile area north of Hickson — on highway 59 north of the city — was one of the most extensively damaged pockets.

A motor tour of the area 12 hours later proved that. To the east near Bright, farms, homes and forests were severely damaged. As one moved west toward Hickson the destruction mounted. North of the village it peaked. Homes, barns, silos, trees. They weren't damaged, they were destroyed. "Miraculous" was a well-used word in the tornado-devastated region for many days after, as residents wondered in awe how so many of their numbers escaped fatal injury. At final tally two were dead and about 150 persons had been treated at area hospitals, many at Woodstock General. Only a handful remained for treatment.

After the twisters had washed out over the east end of Lake Erie, the eyewitness reports poured forth.

Residents standing next to their battered properties described how the howling winds tossed trees like matchsticks, flung cars like toys and peeled roofs off homes. Others told how they ran wildly to snatch a young child to safety or barely held onto a chair or table leg as the funnels threatened to suck them from their homes.

Tears trickled down farmers' weathered faces as they related how in just five minutes 110-year-old farms and rows of 80-year-old pine trees were damaged beyond repair.

Descriptions of the storm were endless: "It sounded like a big bomber coming through," recounted one Bright woman. "A shrill train whistle," said another, and "a loud rumbling like a train building up steam," recalled a Woodstock resident.

A Free Press reporter watched wide-eyed as the twister descended on Woodstock and saw a "monstrous black cloud."

Almost as quickly as news of the disaster vaulted to the front pages of newspapers across the country, stricken residents of the three-county area rallied together to right their communities. Equally as quickly, outside aid streamed to the rescue.

Within hours of the storm, friends, neighbors and relatives opened their homes to families left homeless. In Woodstock only two of the more than 1,000 homeless turned up at the Red Cross emergency centre seeking shelter. In rural and urban areas, hundreds of volunteer workers, municipal employees and property owners — from inside and outside the stricken region — moved to the areas to offer aid.

In the Bright area a 30-man brigade of area Hutterites left their regular chores and descended on several farms to clear debris, mend fences, repair damaged residences and help move those left homeless into temporary residences.

In other areas, including Woodstock, hundreds of Mennonites from Ontario and

the United States arrived to assist in the clean up. Many surrounding cities offered men and equipment.

As residents' heads cleared and they finally realized the magnitude of their dilemma, more than one Woodstock city official was overwhelmed how tornado victims were sticking together and pulling their worlds back together through an amazingly co-ordinated effort.

"It's simply amazing . . . the way these people are working together," said Woodstock city engineer Carl Hevenor. Similar "never say die" sentiments were evident in other battered regions.

Meanwhile, in the political boardrooms cleanup and relief efforts were also moved into high gear with rapidity. Provincial officials from all government ministries — including Premier William Davis — streamed into the area, a central disaster committee was formed and the province agreed to match municipal relief funds.

Less than a week after the disaster as industries reopened and residents continued recovering, it was apparent that people and communities across the province had opened their hearts — and wallets — to the people of the devastated area.

Donations from municipalities poured in — Toronto, \$50,000; Stratford, \$10,000; St. Thomas, \$1,000; Sarnia, \$500; and many more.

One of the major donations came from Operation Rebuild, a 10-hour radio appeal based at CKDK-AM Woodstock and carried on 12 stations across the province. The show, co-anchored by CTV newsman Harvey Kirck, raised about \$450,000.

Money also poured into a special bank account at the Bank of Montreal in Woodstock and township offices across the region. All money raised was placed in a special relief fund to be distributed by the disaster committee as claims were received. As the one-week anniversary of the tornado arrived Red Cross workers in Woodstock were encouraging people to donate cash rather than food.

And as columns of smoke from burning debris swirled skyward around the three-county horizon, scores of contractors began repairing the hundreds of homes and buildings destroyed in the storm. Out-of-town work crews finished helping the Woodstock public utility commission repair damage as power and water lines returned to normal and building supplies and inspectors arrived from across Ontario.

An exhausted Woodstock mayor Wendy Calder predicted it would be "at least a year" before her city would return to normal. "It's hard to say, for some, things might be the same in a year, but for a lot of people they'll never be the same . . . many lost a lot of mementos and life can never be what it was before."





She said: 'My God, their house is gone.'

By Neil Morris
of The Free Press

HICKSON — It was like a steam roller on a drunken rampage.

"We could feel the vibrations in the house and it was a real shrill whistle like a fire engine," recalled a mother of five children who was a witness to the tornado that ripped through this area.

Mrs. Ruth Albrecht described the twister that struck shortly before 7 p.m. as a "real sharp roaring."

Her husband, Lester, was outside in the family barn with son Peter, 13. As the two rushed into the milk house for shelter, they were nearly struck by a falling beam.

Mrs. Albrecht said she looked outside at one point and "our barn was gone."

"Then I said to myself, 'My God, their house is gone,'" she said, referring to the nearby home of Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Zilkie.

The Zilkie farm across the road from the Albrecht's at RR 6 Woodstock, a short distance northeast of Hickson, was destroyed. Every farm building, including a week-old drive-shed, was demolished and the debris scattered for hundreds of yards.

Nelson Albrecht, Lester's brother who lives about a half-mile north of the Zilkie home, saw sparks flying from collapsing electric lines and rushed to the Zilkie farm where he found Mr. Zilkie trapped under a collapsed ceiling. In her kitchen, Mrs. Zilkie, their five boys and a niece visiting from Scotland were unhurt. Rescuers managed to jack up the roof and extricate Zilkie who was taken to hospital by ambulance.

At dawn, neighbors from surrounding farms were poking through the debris in an attempt to save everything possible. Nearby lay dead chickens and at least one cow which had been shot as the result of injuries.

Almost every tree on the farm, some of them almost two feet in diameter, was sheared off and a costly combine lay upside down and wrecked. Behind the home were two heavily damaged vehicles and a farm tractor-trailer on its side in a drainage ditch.

"You read about this in newspapers, but see it

...," said Nelson Albrecht.

Lester's wife Ruth said about 50 young pigs were trapped or dead in their barn.

"It's just awful," said Robert Krug, a Tavistock funeral director, as he surveyed the rubble of the home of Mr. and Mrs. Neil Muxworthy, "I was here less than two days ago for pickles and I said, 'When I want a recipe for keeping things tidy, this is where I'll come.' It was an absolute park here. You can't imagine how beautiful it was kept."

One concession road away, Brian and Darlene Swartzentruber and their four children, of RR 2 Tavistock, escaped unhurt as their home was demolished. Across the tree-strewn road, the home of Ken Mogh looked like a leftover on an atomic test site.

After smashing up farms northwest of Hickson, the twister skirted that community and its sister village of Bright, 15 kilometres to the east, wrecking more farms southwest of Bright.

Mrs. Tom Burrill, who was in the kitchen of the family home at RR 3 Bright with her 10-week-old baby, said the tornado "sounded like a jet engine."

"I stood up in the kitchen with my baby in my arms, looked out and saw the veranda take off," she said as she sorted through the debris of the century-old solid stone home.

Mrs. Burrill, whose husband Tom was in the barn at the time, said the whole thing "was over in less than a minute." She said the wind had been coming from the west much of the day, then suddenly shifted to the east.

All the farm buildings were demolished with the exception of the side walls of the barn. The family dog, "Spooky," who had been in the barn with Burrill, had been acting strange for some time prior to the tornado, Mrs. Burrill said.

"If she could talk, she probably could have told us," Mrs. Burrill said.

Several aircraft criss-crossed the devastated area assessing damage. In at least one location, a large Ontario Hydro transmission tower carrying high-voltage electricity was ripped from its footings and tossed as tangled wreckage into a nearby field.

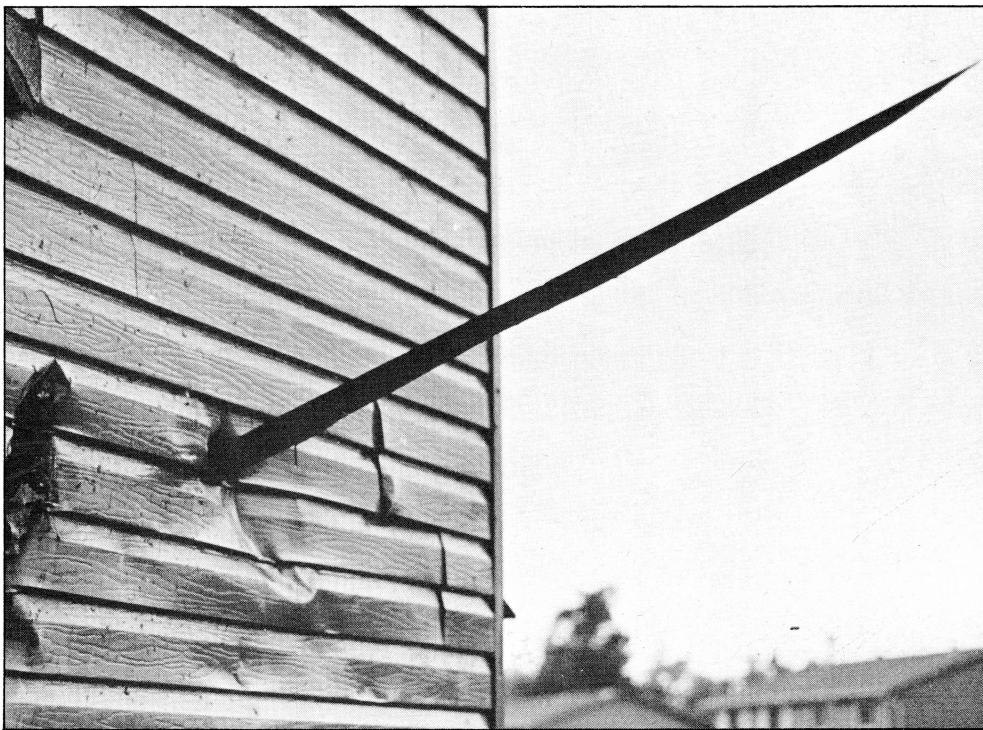
PHOTOS, PAGE 4

A group of Mennonites from the Community farm of the Brethren near Washington discusses plans to help the Burrill family clean up their home south of Bright.

Peter Dearing, white shirt, Burford township clerk-treasurer talks with New Durham home owner Ken Porteous, right, on the lawn of his demolished house. Dearing was telling the victims of the tornado that the township had applied for disaster funds and that he hoped they could arrange for house trailers to be moved onto individual properties to allow owners to remain on their land and clean up the wreckage.

PHOTO, PAGE 5

Building tradesmen and insurance company personnel faced a mammoth task estimating property damages following the storm.



Brick confetti Woman watches house 'explode'

By John Matsui
of The Free Press

HICKSON — Dorothy Middleton of RR 6, Woodstock, dove into the bathroom as the door and large front window of her brick ranch-style home exploded into the darkening sky.

And not a second too soon.

The tornado which swept in a southeasterly direction about three kilometres north of here ripped away the entire front of the house, tossing bricks like confetti and a one-tonne 1978 Cougar parked beside the building about 75 metres into a field.

"I really didn't have any idea what happened. I knew something was happening because the house was falling apart."

"It was like a bomb," she said.

Meanwhile, her husband, Don, was driving toward a neighboring farmhouse owned by his in-laws.

He'd been asked to open hatches to some chicken coops in the event of a storm. "It got awfully windy, awfully fast," he said. The tell-tale whirlwind of a tornado wasn't visible and he compared the tempest to "a white-out, except just wind and rain instead of snow."

The car he was driving began to lift off the ground, but he made no attempt to leave the vehicle. "Are you kidding? There's no way I was getting out of the car."

The entire drama lasted "about two minutes," the Middletons agreed.

Middleton headed back home, saw the debris that was their home for the past month, and feared at first his wife was under the rubble. After searching frantically for her for about 30 minutes, he saw his wife walking down the road.

She had been afraid Middleton was injured and had headed toward the farmhouse, but took refuge with another neighbor. The tornado cleared a swath a few hundred metres wide, destroying everything in its path but left buildings only a few more metres away untouched.

Huge trees were uprooted, powerlines placed in spiderweb patterns and bits of wood scattered everywhere.

Neil Steinman was in his home about half a kilometre away from the Middletons. He saw a cloud of debris rise in the air and pass close to his house, but not touch it. He and his wife hid in the basement, but their home was undamaged.

Neil Muxworthy and his family were less fortunate. The second floor of his home was ripped off the building, a barn destroyed and vehicles and farm machinery tossed into piles. But, no one was injured seriously.

A large group of neighbors gathered later to help salvage household goods and to help herd Muxworthy's frightened dairy cows.

Did dogs' behavior forecast tornado?

By John Matsui
of The Free Press

STRATFORD — Call it coincidence or canine clairvoyance, but at least a few dogs in the city showed strange behavior an hour before a tornado ripped through neighboring Oxford County.

Reactions ranged from panting and pacing to bolting and, in at least one case, a condition known as a gastric torsion, in which the dog's stomach twisted out of position.

As far as can be determined, the tornado came no closer to Stratford than 20 kilometres when it made a southeasterly cut across north Oxford County, crossing Highway 59 about three kilometres north of Hickson.

Before unusual weather, such as a tornado or exceptionally strong storm, strange behavior, particularly in dogs, "certainly has been observed many times," Stratford veterinarian Herman Theijsmeijer said.

"Probably they're signalled by changes in the barometric pressure, but I don't know that we know for sure what causes it."

Theijsmeijer said he treated one dog for a gastric torsion but wouldn't elaborate on the case without the owner's consent.

Twists in the stomach of an animal occur as a result of sudden and vigorous exercise, such as when a dog bolts in fright.

Another veterinarian, Dr. Harry Brightwell, said he is well acquainted with the sensitivity of some dogs to weather changes.

"Those which are nervous will get very nervous an hour before a storm."

In extreme weather conditions, he said, the reaction is often so great it will cause a personality change in the animal.

Such was the case with a dog owned by this reporter. Normally a calm animal, the dog began shivering and pacing after a heavy rainfall here had subsided.

When a door was opened, the dog, which

usually stays close to his master, bolted down the street. Later the dog was found cowering beside his home.

Brightwell said he dealt with no instances of tornado trauma in dogs in August but he's had a few experiences in past years to convince him of the validity of it happening. One dog became so worked up over the coming of a storm, it broke out of its kennel. It bit doorknobs on two separate doors so hard they twisted open, allowing the animal to escape. When the storm broke out, the dog fought furiously to get back into the building, Brightwell said.

He said he didn't know whether animals were used to predict weather, but "they're certainly considering it for earthquakes."

At the London weather office, a spokesman said he never heard of dogs predicting severe weather conditions.

"We've done no study pertaining to animal behavior predicting storms."

After an occurrence such as a tornado, he said, people tend to remember strange behavior in their pets. If no storm broke out, they'd have forgotten it, he said.

But Stratford Humane Society supervisor Sandie Holte said it's not the imagination of pet owners.

"It does happen. It's true."

She said she knows of one dog that has to be kept on tranquilizers before and during storms.

"It's whole body shakes."

The condition is confined almost exclusively to dogs, Mrs. Holte has found in her 2½ years with the society.

She said a few dog owners told her their pets "reacted queerly" before and during the storm that was felt here. "It's not just a reaction to the tornado, but some do it before a storm."

As for the doubting weatherman, she said, "he'll probably get a lot of letters from pet owners who'll say it happened."

Monstrous black cloud

Horsemen, reporter watch funnel skirt

Woodstock fairgrounds

By Mark Bourrie
of The Free Press

WOODSTOCK — I was standing in the doorway of the stables at the Woodstock Fairgrounds with Ken Bogart, a local horse trainer. It was 6:45 p.m. Tuesday and several horses were on the track preparing for a qualifying race.

Thunder grew worse and lightning struck around the fairgrounds. The 150 or so people in the area found themselves in the dark as the power failed.

Bogart and I were making small talk about the races that night — whether they would be called off by the rain — when I looked up and saw a cloud about 1½ kilometres wide, turning in a clockwise direction.

I pointed it out. Bogart and I looked up in horror and stepped around the corner when we saw a funnel come down from the low, black cloud.

The rain, which had been severe, tapered off slightly and the funnel began moving in a northeasterly direction.

The funnel was wide, not like the long, skinny twisters usually thought of in connection with those of the United States Midwest. It resembled a monstrous swirling black cloud. Bogart and I ran into the horse shed and told several people what we'd seen. They stepped outside to watch.

They stood aghast as the twister moved. We ran to the south side of the building to get a better view and, by then, word had travelled through the barn. Trainers, drivers and owners flocked around the door watching.

The twister travelled in a northeasterly direction and, as it grew closer, we could see shingles, branches and birds being sucked toward the centre.

Some of the material began to fall out behind the funnel and several smaller funnels reached down from the cloud to touch the earth. The tornado continued to move toward us and a young girl began to pull the door closed. But some of the older men realized that closing the door could be a deadly mistake — the building would explode if the tornado reached us.

The twister seemed to make no noise and the horses began to panic. Several times, people would say: "I've seen these things change direction." Others countered: "I'm sure it's coming this way."

The tornado didn't reach the fairgrounds but it destroyed trees in the area.

We watched as it passed behind two apartment buildings and realized it was not as close as it seemed. The tornado moved in a constant direction and only once did it lift from the ground while it was in our sight.

We continued to watch as it moved along the southern horizon until it was gone from the overcast sky.

The whole incident lasted just five minutes. People in the building said it was the most incredible and ominous thing they had ever seen.

Some people in the building prayed and most of the children hid along the walls. There is no basement in the stable. The nearest basement was about 200 metres away.

After the tornado passed, torrents of rain flooded the parking lot in the fairgrounds with about eight centimetres of water.

Obliterated! Hamlet of 250 all but wiped from countryside

By Bill Eluchok
of The Free Press

OXFORD CENTRE — Dorothy and Bill Wright were watching a thunderstorm in the distance a minute before this tiny hamlet of 250 all but disappeared from the countryside.

"It only took a matter of seconds. It moved that fast," said Wright, whose home on Stage Road is located 100 metres from the hamlet's centre.

The "it" was a twister that spread havoc over a wide area of southern Oxford County. Scores of tiny villages in the path of a tornado were hit hard and Oxford Centre, directly in its path, was virtually obliterated.

One person was reported dead and half a dozen people were injured.

Volunteer firemen from Norwich Township combed farmhouses in the area in an attempt to free those who might still be trapped.

The Oxford Centre general store was reduced to a pile of bricks. Two churches are gone as well as the community centre. Two persons reported their cars disappeared from their driveways.

Everett Velduzien, a farmer who lives just north of here, said he lost about half his home, and a camping trailer was blown nearly a kilometre down the road.

Grant Esseltine, whose farm is located about 100 metres from the hamlet's centre, managed to pull his wife and daughter into a root cellar when he heard the twister approaching. His five-year-old house was destroyed and two hours after the incident Esseltine was still too shaken to talk about it.

"It sounded like a jet plane flying low," he said. "But I can't tell you how long it took — it seemed like forever."

This reporter managed to call London from the only working phone in the hamlet. It was in the fire hall. A vehicle's lights were turned on so he could read his notes.

PHOTO, PAGE 6

Lethal missiles were hurled about by the furious winds. This sword-like object pierced the wall of a damaged home.





PHOTO, PAGE 8

Little was left of this farm home after the tornado struck.

PHOTOS, PAGE 9

Cars were damaged by flying debris.

Tobacco greenhouses flattened by the twister.

Tree-lined drive of a Vanessa farmhouse.





PHOTOS, PAGE 10

Winds hurtled this car 400 yards into a tobacco field on Brant County Road 4.

This car was swept into a basement of a New Durham house from the adjacent lot.

PHOTO, PAGE 11

Sports car parked on Waterford's Alice Street was demolished by toppled bricks.





PHOTOS, PAGE 12

Creek bed near Woodstock was filled with debris, including wrecked truck, farm implements and siding off a silo.

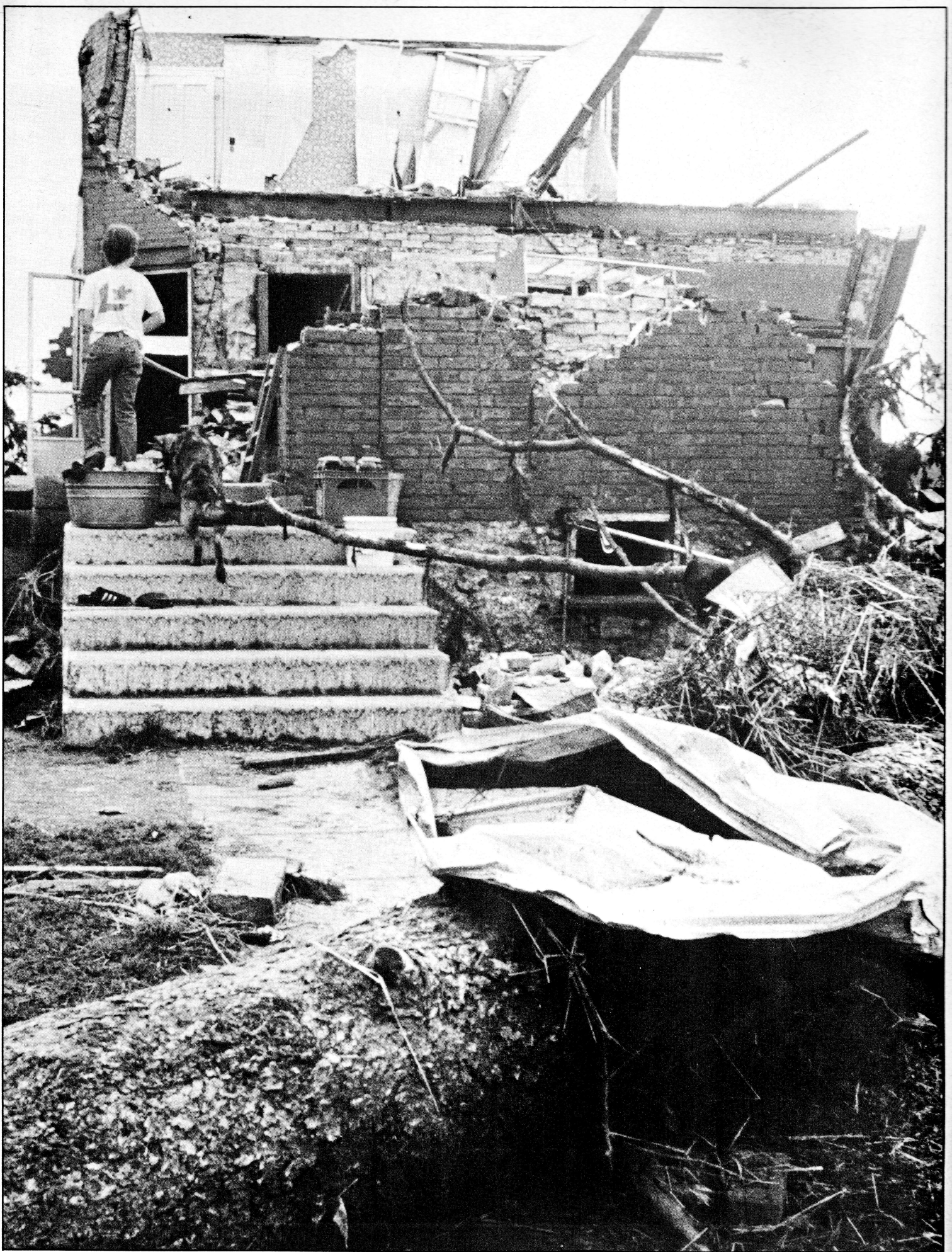
Cabin trailer was topsy-turvy into trees and upper section of a home was sheared off on Hillside Drive in south Woodstock.

PHOTOS, PAGE 13

The tornado slammed this van into a field far from its parking spot.

Beatrice Banks, RR 2 Scotland, hid in basement of her home along with other family members while the tornado ripped apart their two-storey dwelling, barn, garage and steel shed.

Vehicles were thrown about like children's toys by the vicious winds.





PHOTO, PAGE 14

Tragic homecoming for this lad and his dog.

PHOTOS, PAGE 15

Tree-lined approach to the house was decimated.

Walls of this stately old home near Vanessa stood solidly, but the roof was blown asunder.

Road leading into Oxford Centre from the east looked like a battle zone.





PHOTOS, PAGE 16

Flying debris killed a mother and seriously injured her daughter when the tornado hit this rural home.

After the storm, this is what remained of the store at Oxford Centre's main corner.

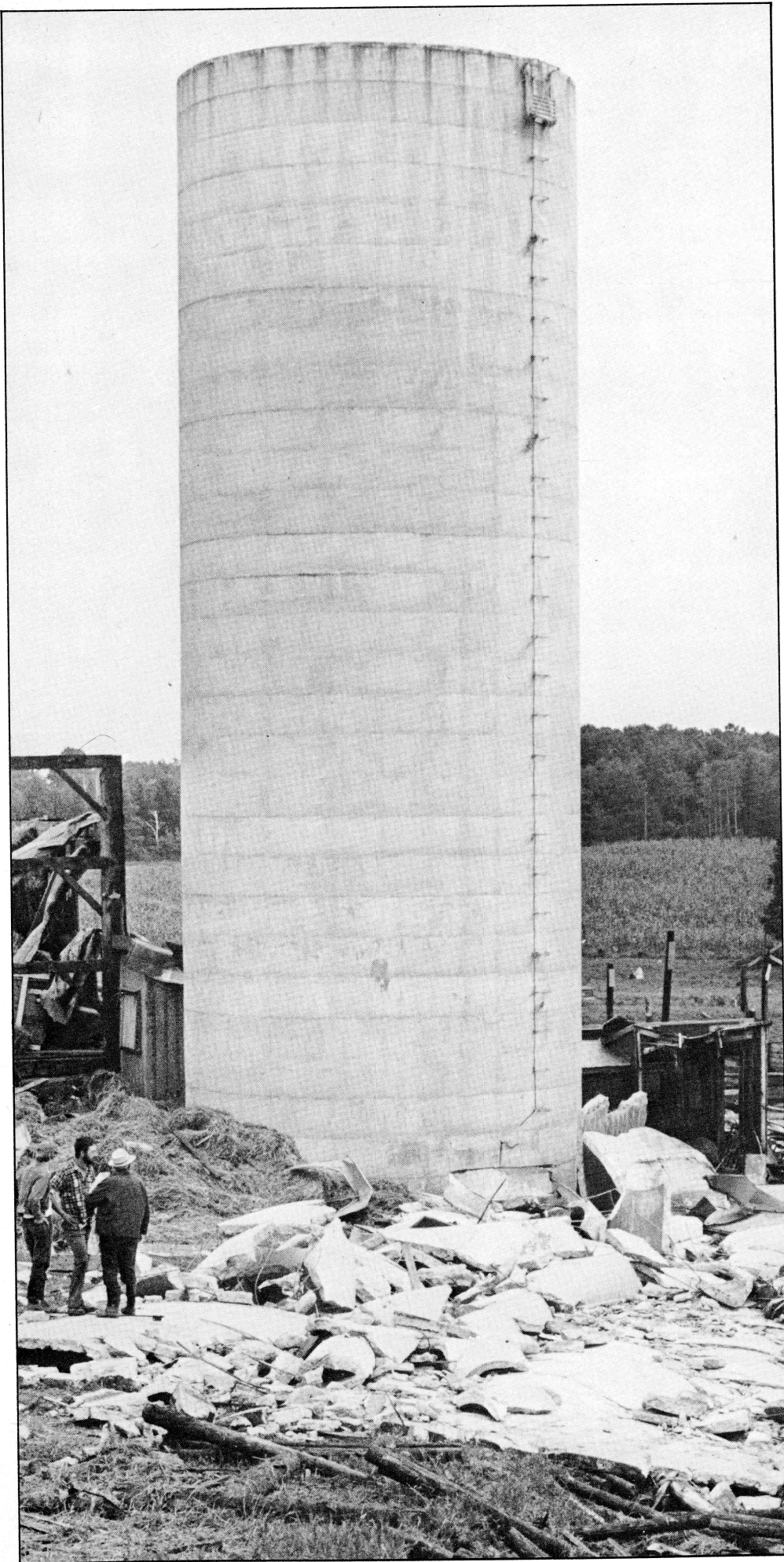
PHOTOS, PAGE 17

Steps of the century-old Oxford Centre community hall lead to rubble, where once stood the hamlet's focal point.

Hydro pole was felled dangerously near a damaged house in south Woodstock.

The tornado vented its fury on everything in its path.





PHOTO, PAGE 18

Of all the structures on this farm, only a silo stood after the tornado hit.

PHOTO, PAGE 19

This silo remained standing, but the one beside it was flattened.





PHOTOS, PAGE 20

Some gravestones were damaged and part of the roof was knocked off the Vanessa United Church.

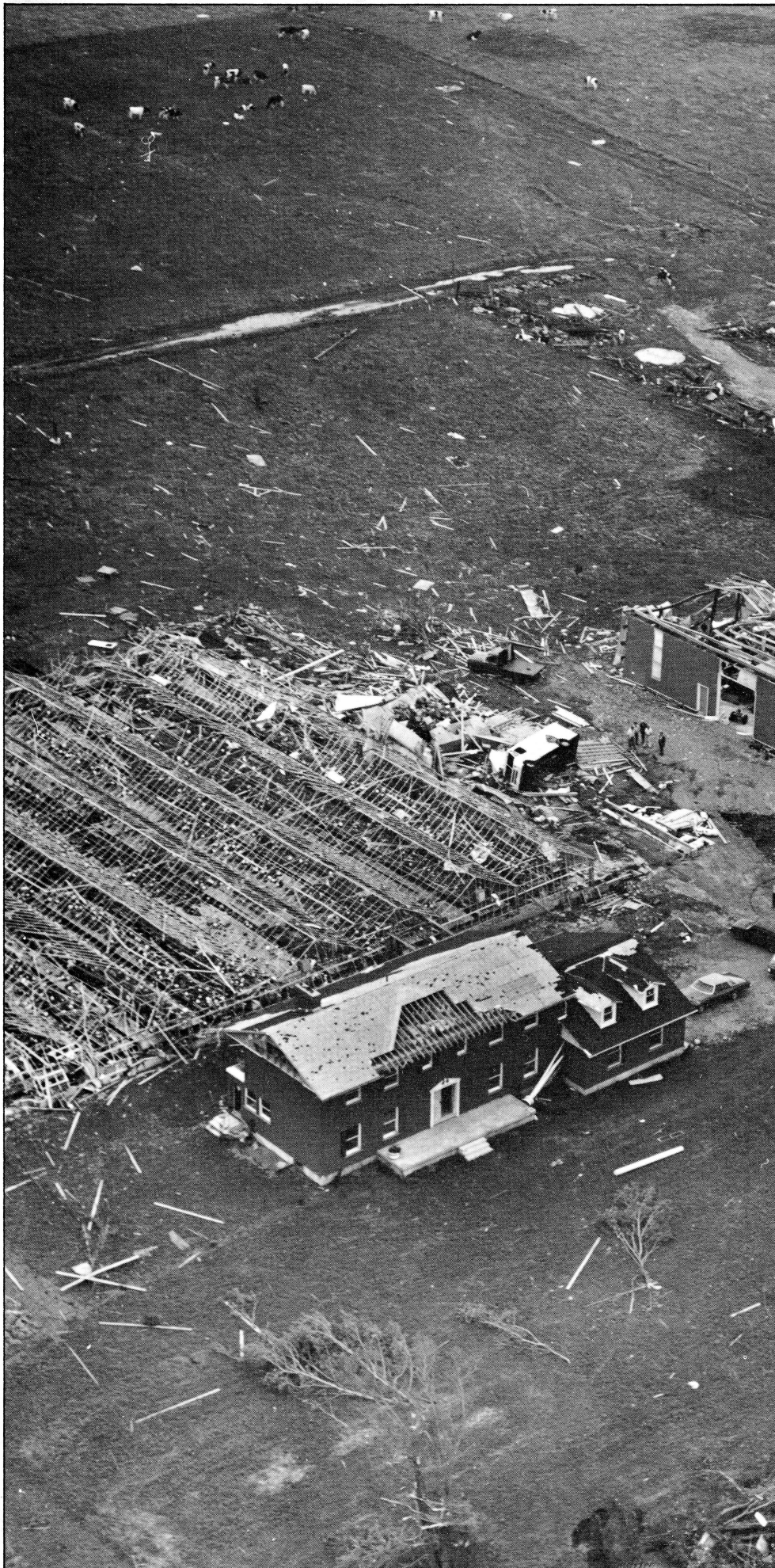
Inside of the church was left a shambles of brick and lumber.

PHOTOS, PAGE 21

Trees and plants were ravaged by the winds, but the gravestone remained.

Windows, walls and pews stayed intact, but the roof blew away at Oxford Centre United Church.





PHOTOS, PAGE 22

The tent became "home" after the tornado levelled the Armstrong family's house. Here, David Armstrong helps his mother Dorothy remove bedroom furnishings left intact.

Arthur Martin removes a few of wife Beatrice's dresses from their demolished home in Vanessa. Mrs. Martin sustained injuries.

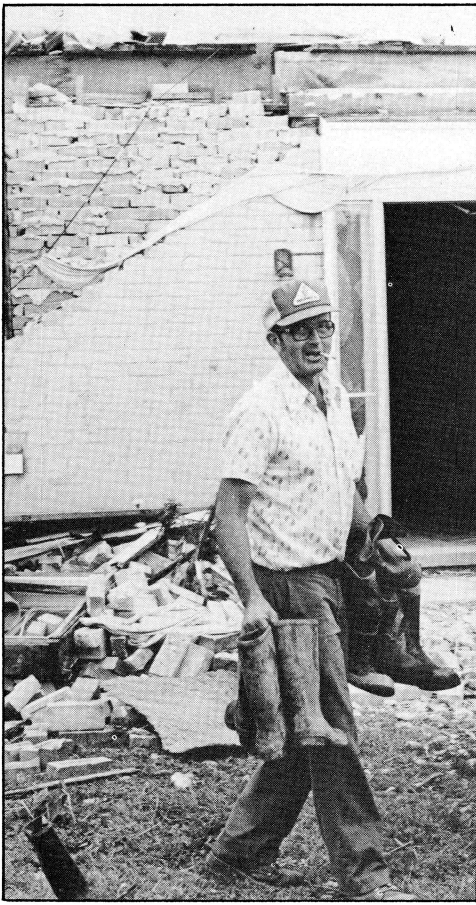
Angus Mowat of Oxford Centre stands before the remains of his two-storey house

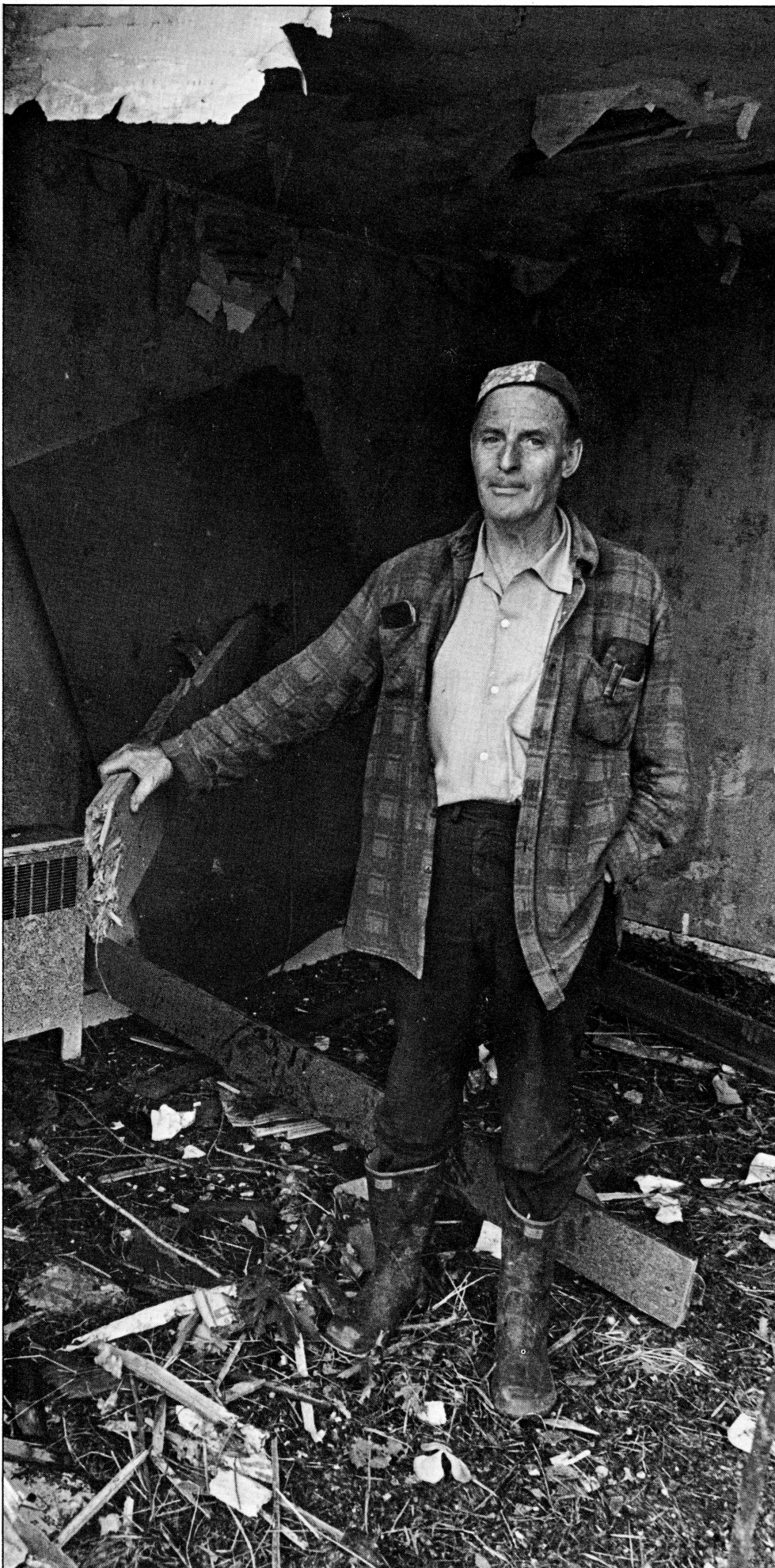
PHOTO, PAGE 23

Some farms northeast of Norwich were badly hit by the storm.









PHOTO, PAGE 24 & 25

Loss to the farming community was enormous as the wind stripped leaves from standing crops, destroyed homes and farm buildings, killed livestock and flattened windbreaks. The storm roared through this farm near New Durham leaving a shambles in its wake. Hay already harvested is laid bare to the elements. Although silos on this farm appear undamaged, silos on other farms were blown down and turned into rubble or incredible as it may seem, lifted from their foundations, moved and dropped down again intact.

PHOTOS, PAGE 26

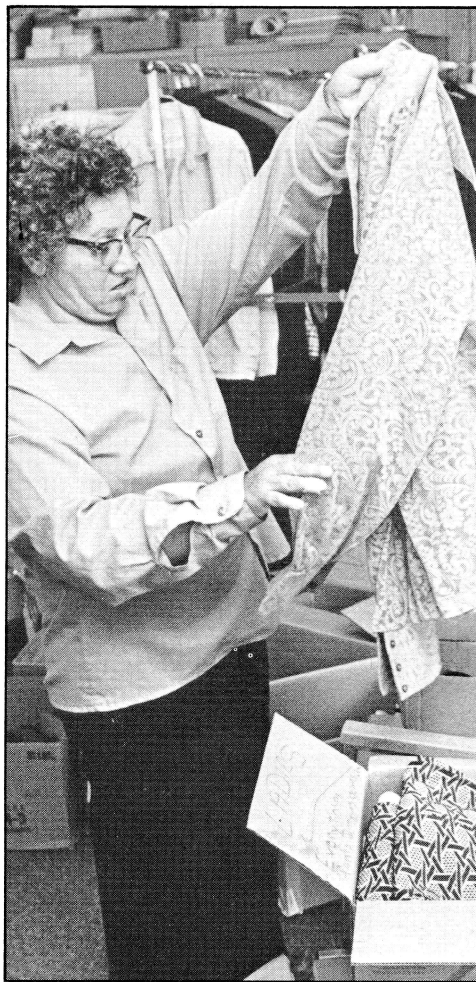
People did what they could to help tornado victims immediately after the storm. Here, Mac Chalkley of Embro carries salvaged footwear to be loaded onto a pickup truck.

Marjorie Walker, left, of Vanessa and Mary Vince, Simcoe, gather personal belongings of their sister-in-law Mrs. Addie Walker, who was hospitalized with a broken leg as a result of the storm. Winds tore apart Mrs. Walker's Vanessa home.

Steve Kelly, right, owned this home in south Woodstock for just three days before the twister smashed it. Neighbor Robin LaRose offers help.

PHOTO, PAGE 27

Ken Porteous rests his hand on a two-by-eight inch plank which crashed through the living room window and pierced the wall of his New Durham home.





PHOTOS, PAGE 28

Lorraine Gagne, a tobacco worker from Quebec who was staying at the Vanessa home of Arthur and Beatrice Martin, lifts an iron pot out of the wreckage.

At the Oxford County branch of the Canadian Red Cross, Vera Gosden was among volunteers sorting clothing to be distributed among tornado victims.

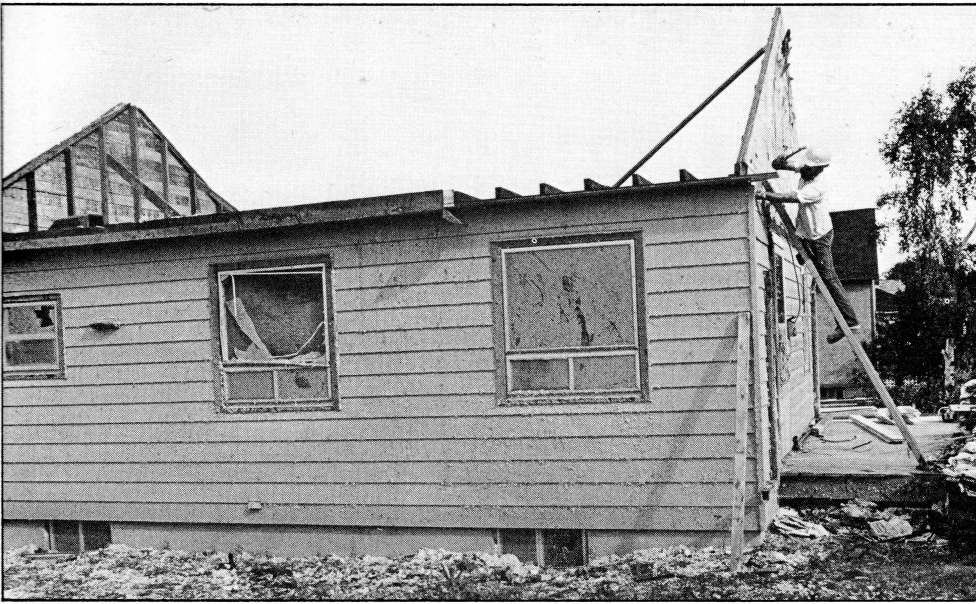
Clarence Dean was one of several volunteers making up food boxes of donated canned goods at the United Auto Workers Local 636 building in Woodstock.

Volunteers move into the Oxford Centre United Church to start cleanup work.

PHOTO, PAGE 29

Volunteer cleanup crews get lunch from Brantford Red Cross workers. Meals were supplied by various women's and church groups in the tornado-hit area and distributed by the Red Cross.





PHOTOS, PAGE 30

Occupants of this home in Woodstock vacate with a few possessions after the tornado ripped through the structure.

Tornado victims worked hard to clean up what was left by the storm.

Bill Haley sits outside his Old Dominion Cheese House, destroyed by the tornado at New Durham, and tells daughter Joan, Toronto, of the frightening experience.

PHOTOS, PAGE 31

After the storm, carpenters were busy trying to put back the pieces of building that could be restored.

Family members and friends pitched in to salvage what they could from wrecked homes. Here a freezer is loaded onto a pickup truck.

The foundation of this two-storey home was all that remained unscathed.

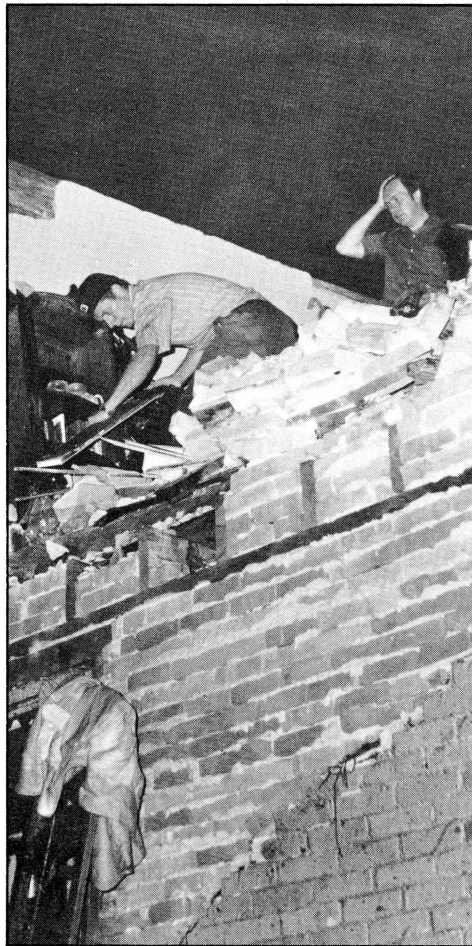




PHOTOS, PAGE 32 & 33

The storm played havoc with highway traffic, as cars and trucks were blown off roads. Here a tractor-trailer lays on its side in the median of Highway 401 near Woodstock.





PHOTOS, PAGE 34

At Vanessa, hundreds of persons swarmed over the ruins picking up pieces of buildings and trees and putting them in huge piles to be burnt or carried off in trucks.

A group from the Mennonite Central Committee of Kitchener helped clear wreckage in the stricken area. They were among thousands of volunteers who gave aid in a variety of ways.

The picturesque hamlet of Oxford Centre was practically wiped out by the storm.

PHOTOS, PAGE 35

Friends and neighbors of the Neil Muxworthy family help salvage household belongings north of Hickson.

Sections of Brant County Road 4 were choked by fallen trees and power lines.

Scores of farm buildings in the path of the tornado were levelled and damage of equipment was extensive.



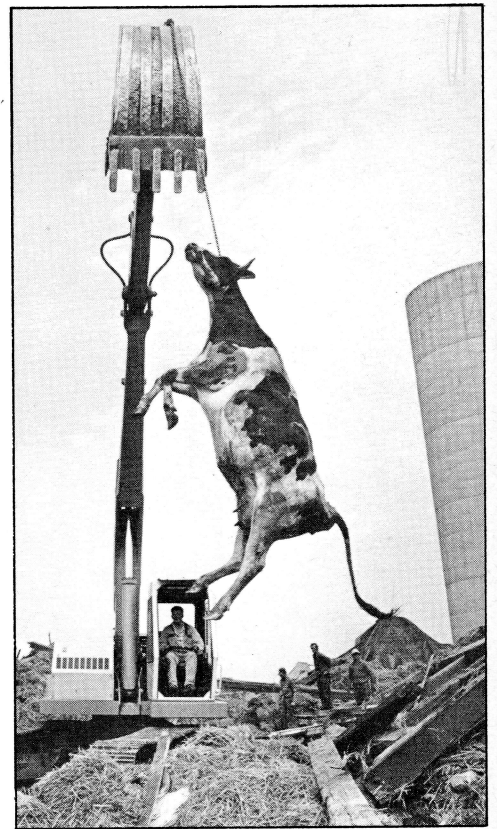
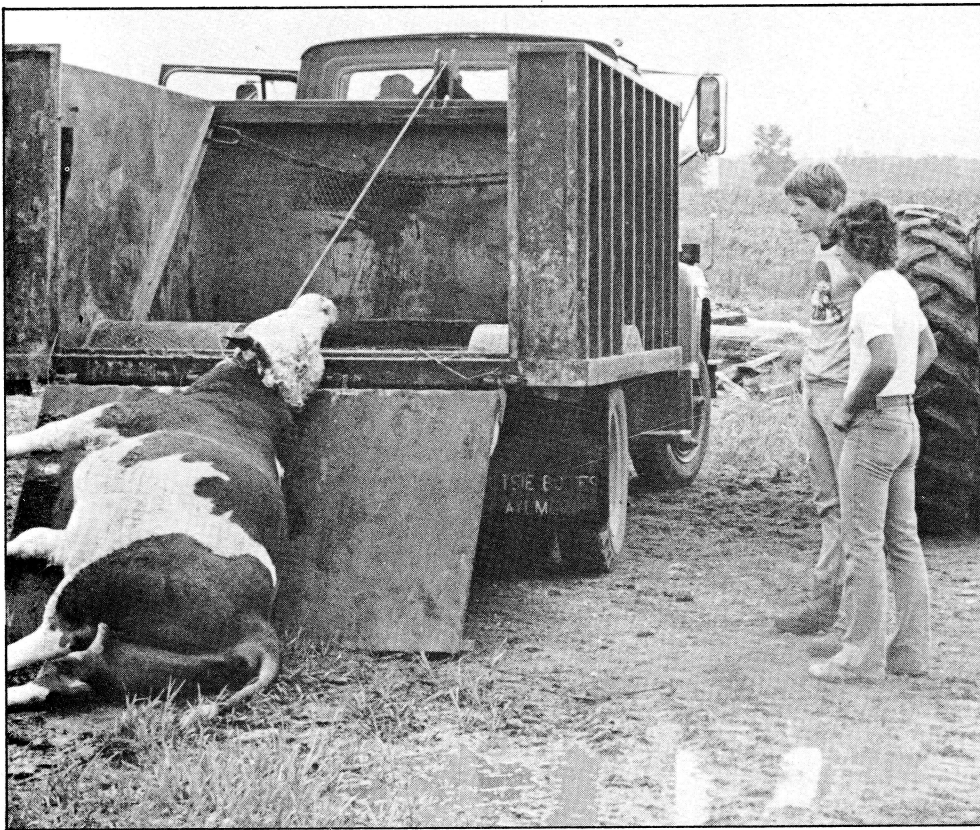


PHOTOS, PAGE 36

Oxford Centre looked like a battlefield. Smoke was heavy as workers set fire to piles of rubble.

PHOTO, PAGE 37

Trees felled by the tornado in Waterford were sawn and removed by volunteers.



Sarnia recalls killer twister 26 years ago

By Nick Martin
of The Free Press

It was Sarnia's turn to feel the fury of a killer tornado 26 years ago when a funnel ripped a 240-kilometre trail of destruction across Michigan and Southwestern Ontario. Seven persons were killed in the Sarnia area. Miraculously, while much of Sarnia's downtown was blown off the map, no one died in the city itself.

The tornado hit Sarnia shortly after 5:30 p.m. on May 21, 1953, wrecking stores and businesses along Front and Christina streets in the downtown core. Damage was conservatively estimated at \$10 million in an initial assessment but the final toll for the region was never calculated. Reconstruction took years to complete.

Three persons died in Port Huron before the tornado raged across the border. A 70-year-old woman was sucked through her kitchen window and killed in Warwick Township. Three more died in East Williams Township when their homes were crushed. The Vendome Hotel and Imperial Theatre — longtime landmarks in downtown Sarnia — were destroyed.

The tornado narrowly missed the north end of London, cutting down farms and hydro towers in London Township before passing into Downie Township in Perth County to flatten homes and barns. Observers at the London Airport on Crumlin Road had a clear view of the funnel as it snaked its way past the city and disappeared to the northeast.

Several farms were heavily damaged in Forest. Only one wall remained of a school in Arkona and both a school and the Ebenezer United Church were demolished in West Nissouri Township.

The riot act was read in Sarnia and police barricaded the downtown area. Provincial police closed off the Blue Water Bridge to everyone but those able to prove they had an urgent reason to be in Sarnia as thousands of sightseers clogged the highways to rubberneck at the battlefield-like destruction.

More than 500 persons were left homeless in Sarnia.

Free Press reporter Leon Turner wrote on May 22, 1953, that a hail storm moments before the tornado hit was credited with driving hundreds of people indoors and possibly saving many lives in Sarnia.

Turner recalled that he set up an emergency newsroom in the Windsor Hotel after the roof was blown off The Free Press office in Sarnia. Telephone calls to London had to be routed through Philadelphia.

The worst tornado death toll in Southwestern Ontario occurred April 3, 1974, when a curling club collapsed in Windsor, killing eight persons. More than 320 people died in the United States that day.

Oxford County had been hit by a tornado almost two years to the day that Tuesday's storm swept into the county. More than \$50,000 damage was caused to farms near the hamlet of Washington on Aug. 9, 1977, but no injuries were reported.

Quiet evening turns into night of terror

By John Hamilton
of The Free Press

WOODSTOCK — Doug Hook couldn't have timed it worse when he set off across town for a "quiet evening" in a friend's house in this town's southeast corner.

Two hours after he arrived at 340 Parkinson Rd., he was huddled in the basement of friend Al McBride's home as a tornado ripped through the area.

"It was a hell of a scare. We were hugging each other, and trembling until it passed," Hook said later. Besides McBride and his wife, Janet, McBride's mother and two other friends were also in the basement.

The entire roof of the bungalow was torn off as the roof of St. Patrick's Separate School behind the McBride home came "hurtling across the road," Hook said.

The group had just sat down for dinner shortly before 7 p.m. when they got the first warning of immediate danger — "a loud rumbling like a train building up (steam) nearby."

"The next thing we knew all the kitchen windows shattered. We were lucky no one was hurt," Hook said. "We scrambled up and went down to the basement where we really cowered for about 10 minutes."

Mrs. McBride, casting her eyes 'round the roofless shell of her home, found furniture missing or shattered, a side door ripped off,

and a lot of insulation torn loose from walls. When she looked outside the walls, she saw the twister had landed many of the missing articles on the lawn or roadside.

"It's really terrible, but we were really lucky not to get hurt," she said.

That's the situation most residents in the area found themselves in — they counted their blessing above their losses.

Rob Micol, 14, of 321 Mill St., and his parents, Joe and Marie, said their first warning came when the hydro failed.

"Then we looked outside and saw branches and ashes flying about," Joe said.

The roof of the Micol home was torn off and the garage badly damaged.

"Inside the house it's something close to chaos with appliances and furniture smashed to pieces," he said. "But we are lucky. No one was injured."

Lil Crawford, of 371 Mill St., said she was lying in her bedroom with a window open when "the noise started to gather and shattered the window."

All the windows in the Crawford home were broken and some of the siding was damaged by a falling tree.

"It was really frightening, but we're here to talk about it," she said.

Most of the homes in the area were badly damaged as were most homes and houses under construction in the adjacent Bridlewood Acres subdivision.

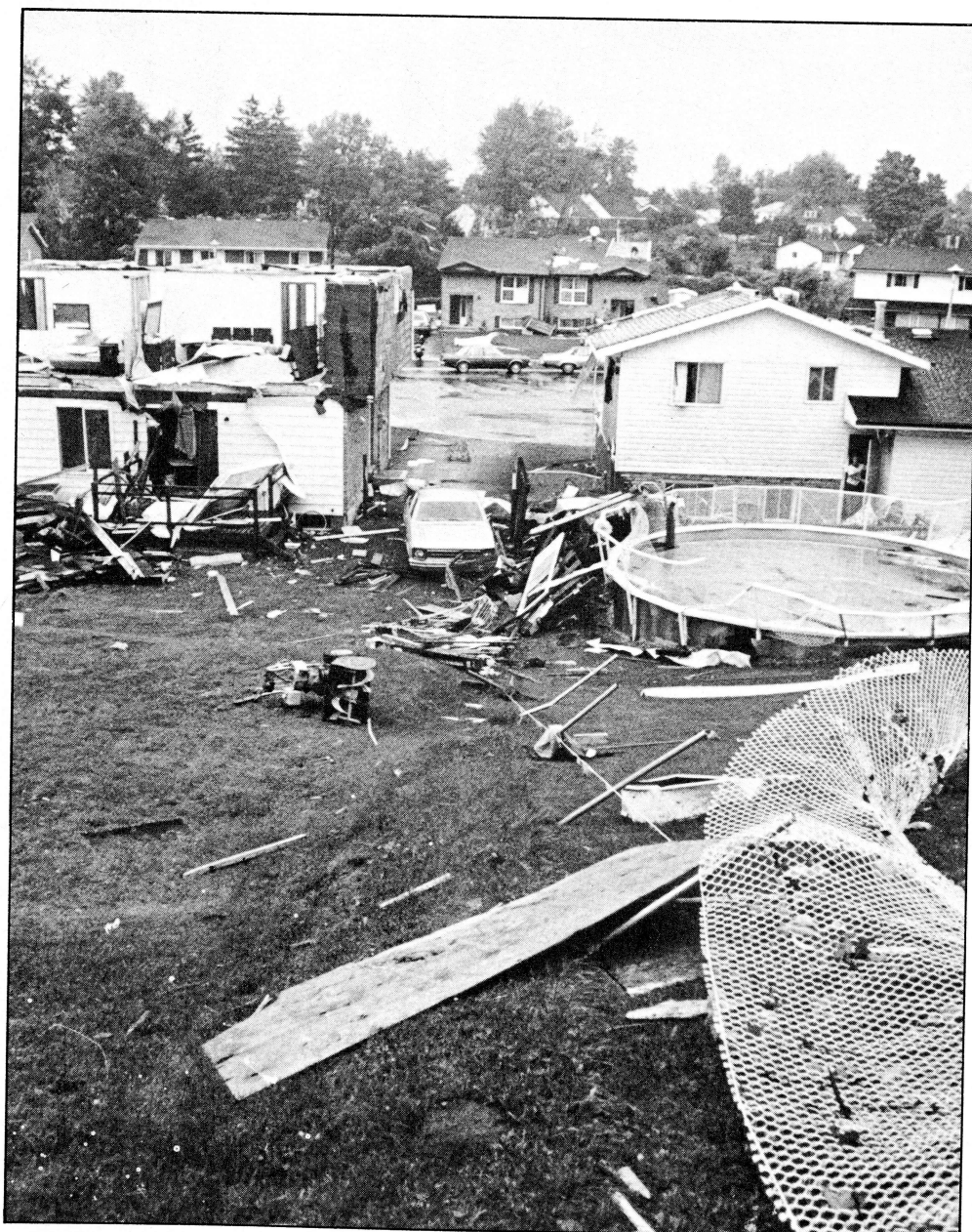
PHOTOS, PAGE 38

The tornado toll was heavy among farm animals. Here a dead bull is hoisted onto a truck for removal.

Cow killed during the storm is lifted from the wreckage of a barn.

A number of beef cattle injured by flying debris had to be shot and removed.





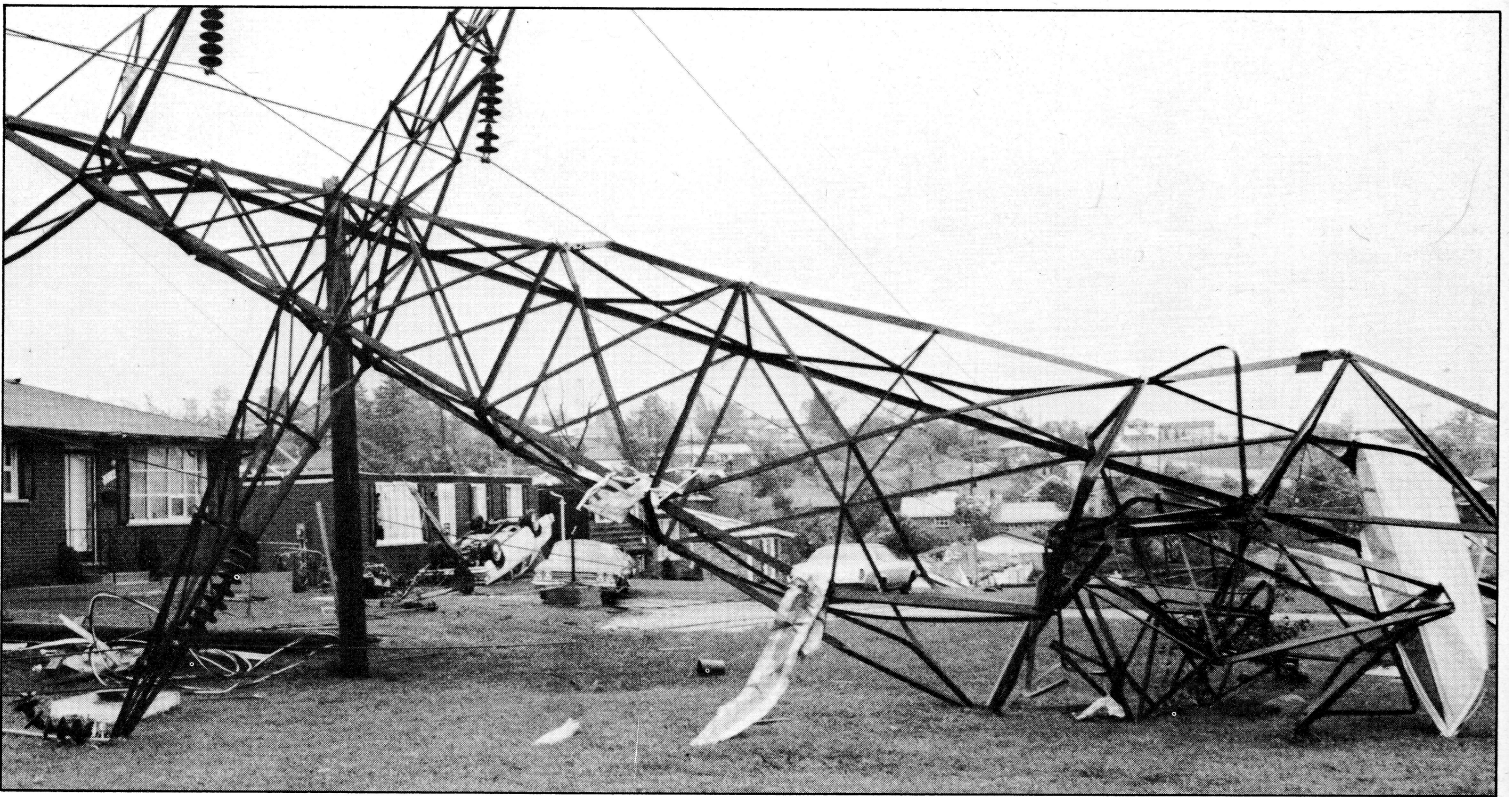
PHOTO, PAGE 40

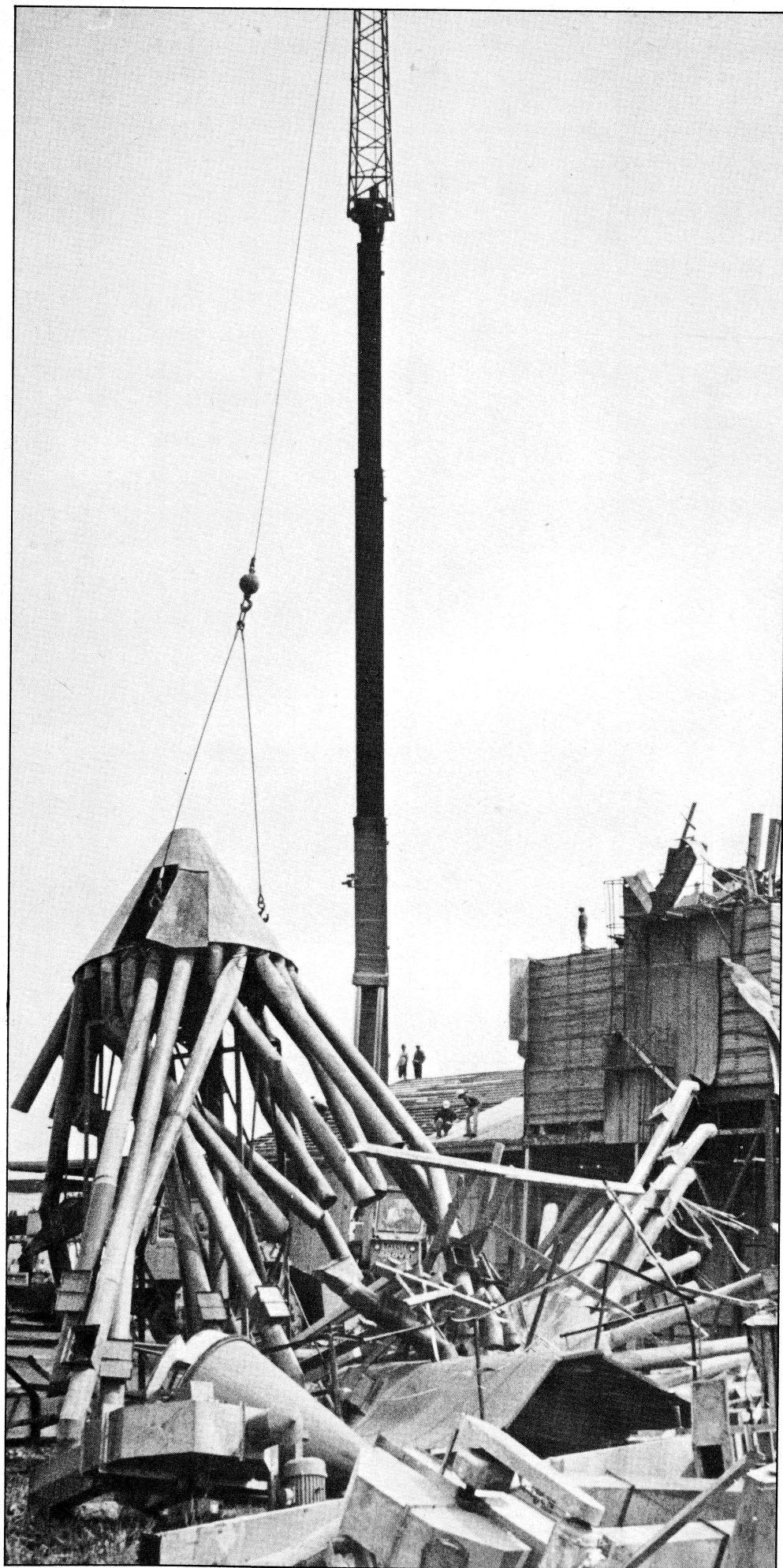
Aerial photo gives panoramic view of damage to homes on Manitoba Street, Woodstock. This view looks north with Parkinson Road running left to right in the centre of the photo.

PHOTOS, PAGE 41

Small groups of people stood in a state of shock after the tornado struck. There was little left to rebuild in Oxford Centre.

Homes on Innes Place in Woodstock were badly damaged.



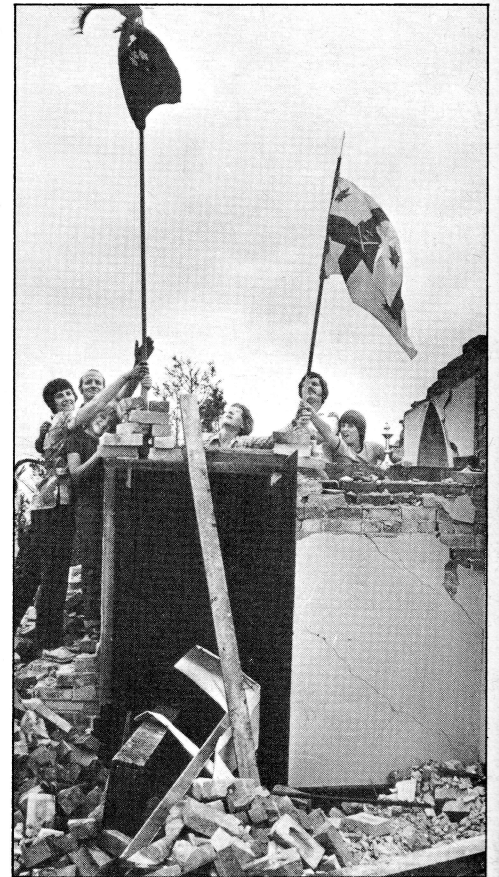


PHOTOS, PAGE 42

Hydro towers and power lines came crashing down during the storm. Lack of communication was an immediate result. As darkness closed in, the lack of lighting compounded the problem.

PHOTO, PAGE 43

A large crane begins clearing debris at the Provimi plant in south Woodstock in preparation for reconstruction.





PHOTOS, PAGE 44

In the wake of the storm came harmony as a group of Hutterites joined other volunteers to clear wreckage at a farm near Bright.

"We shall overcome" appears to be the slogan of this group of Oxford Centre residents, who raised the Ontario ensign and the Anglican Church flag above the ruins of Christ Church.

Although shingles were only slightly ruffled, the tornado lifted the entire roof from this home.

PHOTOS, PAGE 45

Throughout the storm-stricken area relief fund posts were manned by volunteers.

Delhi Township Mayor Arnold Sayeau and Ontario Premier William Davis discuss damage at the hamlet of Vanessa. Davis visited five tornado-ravaged areas and promised provincial aid.



PHOTO, PAGE 46

Tragic victims Jennifer Almas, 6, and brother Mark, 5, huddle in shock and confusion with only stuffed dolls to keep them company. Hundreds of tornado victims, their homes either badly damaged or completely obliterated, need as much help as they can get.

TORNADO

Layout and design by: Creative Services

Printed in Canada
Published and copyrighted by LONDON
FREE PRESS PRINTING
COMPANY LIMITED, 369 York Street,
London, Ontario,
Canada N6A 4G1

Photographs by:

Ron Albertson
George Blumson
Bill Eluchok
Ed Heal
Ernie Lee
Neil Morris
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Cover Photo by:

Dominic Scalisi

 The London Free Press

